WHAT "WHAT IT'S LIKE" IS ALL ABOUT
OR
HOW TO TALK LIKE A ZOMBIE

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Night of the Living Dead: The Story Begins

An enduring problem in our understanding of consciousness is roughly that of explaining how the so-called phenomenal or qualitative features of our conscious experience fit into the rest of nature. I think that the best way to shed light on this problem is by recasting it as an issue surrounding the reference or meanings of the phenomenal concepts we deploy to describe the qualitative dimensions of our conscious experience. After all, if we are to regard the problem as genuinely problematic, then the issue must be raised in some terms or other. The so-called "hard problem" of consciousness arises because statements involving the qualitative character of experience bear no evident logical connections to, and even seem incommensurable with, descriptions couched in physical, physiological, functional, or even intentional terms. Since philosophers have typically attempted to conceptualize the phenomenal realm in terms of "what it's like" to have certain conscious experiences, the problem of phenomenal consciousness ultimately boils down to what "what it's like" is all about.

Curiously, it strikes me that this question about the aboutness of "what it's like" would be most pressing for the zombie of recent philosophical legend, a creature defined by some as a being that is physically, functionally, intentionally, and otherwise materially equivalent to ordinary human beings like us, but who altogether lacks the "benefits" of, or any acquaintance with, consciousness. As the very embodiments of the ballyhooed explanatory gap (indeed, as its illustration *par excellence*), zombie attacks are unleashed upon those seeking some sort of materialistic unpacking of consciousness. Those who invoke zombies—Dave Chalmers chief among them—suppose that if such beings are indeed conceivable, then it would appear that the distribution of physical, functional, intentional, or otherwise mundane material properties in a world just could not dictate or settle that world's phenomenal character. Phenomenal properties, if they exist at all, would have to occupy an additional stratum of reality above and beyond the mundane material as ordinarily understood. We may aptly dub such folk "super-materialists," for the moniker nicely captures an ambivalence in how the position may be understood. To their materialist opponents, supermaterialism advocates acceptance of the existence of spooky, *super*natural, *non*-material features of the world, while supermaterialists themselves think they are simply urging us to acknowledge an underlying, intrinsic facet of our material existence which has heretofore eluded systematic scientific investigation.

In response, most materialists have felt compelled to reject the zombie menace altogether. Taking great pains to expose how incoherent or unimaginably preposterous zombies would have to be, the zombie hypothesis, they claim, is ultimately inconceivable.[1] Either all this supermaterialistic talk about phenomenal consciousness, qualia, and "what it's like" will turn out to be reducible to mundane material notions after all, or it will need to be eliminated (or "quined," as Dennett might say). In the end, all those supermaterialistic intuitions behind explanatory gap arguments will need to be explained away. However, these same zombic hunches have a notorious, yet fitting, tendency to come back to life. So reductive materialists and eliminativists find themselves again and again in the

awkward position of denying the apparent. As a result, the debate between conventional materialists and supermaterialists have often appeared to trade on the dull and stultifying thud of clashing intuitions.

Missing in the long, dreary exchange between supermaterialists and their conventional materialist opponents is what I take to be the correct materialist response. That is to grant the explanatory gap, and yet to deny that our consciousness is somehow supermaterial (though some consciousness could be). In effect, that is to claim that *we* are the zombies that the super materialists have taken such pains to conceive and that conventional materialists have taken such pains to eradicate. As such, we have learned how to embrace explanatory gap intuitions, yet without the "benefits" of full-blooded supermaterial conscious experience.[2]

Now it will certainly be objected that my being a zombie is to be ruled out by definitional fiat. We cannot be zombies, don't you know, because by definition zombies are just like us, *except* that they lack our conscious experience. Fine; so be it. If zombies are defined as non-human (or not having *our* consciousness), then I am perfectly content to give up the term. But notice how this definition threatens to beg the question in favor of supermaterialism. Insofar as it defines zombies as different from us *and* as lacking any acquaintance with supermaterial qualia, it presupposes that our conscious experience must be something above and beyond the mundane material. However, if they must be so different from us, why should we not just turn this reasoning on its head? Why not instead think of the zombies more like angelic beings, possessing an acquaintance with a supermaterial realm that we turn out to lack? In sum, we must be careful not to allow the supermaterialist to presuppose from the very outset that we have the acquaintance with supermaterial qualia that this materialist response brings into question. The issue of interest is not whether we differ from zombies, but whether our consciousness is of an angelic or a zombic sort.

In short, then, the position I am trying to stake out *as actual* is the one that is envisioned and granted to be *possible* by zombieists: that an explanatory gap between the phenomenal and the material exists and nevertheless there could be creatures who talk about consciousness much like we do yet turn out to lack "genuine" consciousness *as supermaterialists understand it.* My claim, then, is that whatever it is like to be me is equivalent to whatever it is like to be one of those things Chalmers and his ilk are envisioning and call a "zombie." Call them what you like; I am one of *them.* Indeed, it should strike one that it is more than a tad awkward for a super-materialist to turn around and close off this admittedly possible scenario as somehow impossible after all, for that would just seem to play into the hands of their materialist opponents who have suspected all along that there is something deeply wrong with the very idea of a zombie.

To be sure, there is a long-recognized oddity about zombies. By supermaterialist's lights, there is nothing anyone can do to convince them that they are zombies, or that they lack the consciousness of "regular" folk. And there is nothing one can say in defense of the claim that we are *not* zombies that zombies themselves would not find convincing. They harbor the same zombic hunches that we do, and the hard problem of consciousness is

every bit as hard for them as it is for us. The bare compellingness of zombie arguments does not separate us from them. Stranger still, it would even seem possible for non-zombies to learn how to master phenomenal concepts and come to talk effectively about their conscious experience *from zombies*. Whether or not one is a zombie turns out to be a matter of being *acquainted* with supermaterial qualia, and there are no *reasons* to be given to show that one is or is not so acquainted. So either zombies are horribly mistaken about the nature of their own conscious experience, or their phenomenal concepts turn out, unbeknownst to them, to mean something very different from what supermaterialists take our phenomenal concepts to mean.

Indeed, I suspect that this little bit of weirdness is what has lead so many to insist on the absurdity of the zombie hypothesis. But rather than rejecting the hypothesis as somehow self-refuting, I think that the oddity shows that we should ultimately embrace it as describing the conditions of our actual world. So in this admittedly perverse little paper, I would like to view the explanatory gap *from the zombie's perspective*. Indeed, I will suggest in all seriousness that I am just such a creature, and that what my own phenomenal discourse is all about is very different from what supermaterialists take it to be. So though it might seem fitting for folk like Chalmers to embrace an actual zombie, I am afraid my presence would give them cold comfort. Indeed, I suspect it should frighten the bejeezus out of them. For as we all know, where there is one zombie there are bound to be more—many more. And while I have no untoward designs upon your *brain*, I am as hell-bent as any of the living dead on infecting your *mind* with the idea (or would it be better to say "meme"?) that you too are a zombie.

Perhaps the greatest resistance to the idea that I am truly what I claim to be comes from the fact that I am perfectly self-reflective and I talk with such facility about "what it's like" to have conscious experiences. My strategy for waging "meme"-warfare will be to explain how zombies like me can learn to talk about the so-called qualitative dimension of our experiences in a way that respects the same intuitions that motivate arguments for supermaterialism, and which allows them to pass as so "normal." If my account of how I came to talk about "what it's like" sounds plausible, or (better yet) familiar, then perhaps I will have succeeded in my mission of converting you to the unholy ranks of the living dead (or, if you prefer, the walking unconscious).

Dawn of the Dead: How It "Looks" and "What It's Like"

Even a committed zombie like me is disposed to talk about "what it's like" to have various conscious experiences. So let's begin with a brief account of how I have come to talk about my experiences, or how things look or appear to me. My overall strategy (a common one among us zombies) is to work from the outside in, rather than the inside out. My ideas of inner experience derive from my concepts of the external properties they are impressions of. Like everyone else, I have had to learn from others how to apply observation vocabulary in experience. My dispositions to classify things *as red*, or even *as looking red* is not innate. While there might be biologically innate predilections for certain classification schemes, other speakers of our language (zombies and non-zombies

alike) must teach us how to make observation reports that accord with the specific classificatory dispositions of our con-linguistics. In short, I have faced the task of coordinating or calibrating states of myself with the application of observation concepts in experience. Simply put, I have had to learn to report the presence of a certain property (e.g., red) whenever I am struck in certain fashions—that is, whenever I am in a certain internal discriminatory state. And I have further learned when to *restrain* my acquired dispositions to report such a presence when circumstances are such that my being in a particular discriminatory state is *not* a reliable indicator of something actually exhibiting that property.[3] In those circumstances, I have learned to report that it only "looks" or "seems" as if that property is present, meaning that I am being stimulated in a way that, under normal circumstances, *would* reliably indicate that property's presence.

For me at least, these internal discriminatory states are presumably physiological states (and states of my nervous system in particular). But of course I am not able to identify them in such rarefied terms. Ordinary observation vocabulary—including "looks"-talk—is conceptually prior to a developed neuroscience. In speaking about the task facing all speakers as they learn to apply observation concepts in experience, we should remain theoretically non-committal regarding the underlying physiological substrate. My concept of a *sense impression* is my way of referring to these underlying discriminatory states in a theoretically neutral way. As I use the term, a sense impression of some particular perceptible property is the imprint that is characteristically left upon one by the presence of that property under normal circumstances, which can then be used by that subject to elicit observation reports of its presence.[4] So the task described above is that of my learning how to coordinate sense impressions with the application of appropriate observation concepts. And when I say that something merely "looks red" to me, I am reporting being in a discriminatory state that I have "recruited" (to borrow a term of Dretske's) to indicate to me the presence of red things in my environment; that is, I am reporting my red sense impression.

Now I beg you to notice a few things that should stand out about this notion of a sense impression. First, we have a readily explicable *authority* over sense impressions that we do not have with respect to external features of the world. To report the presence of a red sense impression, one needs merely to detect when they are disposed to report when something is or looks red to them. No gap opens up between having a sense impression of some property and having, if you will, an impression of that impression, for the discriminatory state that I am in when I have a red sense impression is precisely that— a red sense impression.[5] Moreover, since the conditions in which one is disposed to report the presence of a red sense impression are precisely those in which something is or looks red to that subject, it pleasantly follows that reports *about* sense impressions are, what you might say, "phenomenally transparent." So it should be evident that while I characterize my sense impressions in terms of the observable properties of external things, I do not need to imbue them with any mysterious, non-material phenomenal analogues to external properties. I do not need to "paint" my red sense impressions with phenomenally red paint. In short, sense impressions do not have to possess the qualities that they are impressions of.[6]

Second, since sense impressions are understood as internal discriminatory states that dispose subjects to make certain observation reports, they are not identified in physical or physiological terms, but rather in terms of their causal or behavioral roles. As such, different sense impressions of the same perceptual quality might have vastly different intrinsic constitutions or realizations. A sense impression of red for a typical human might be realized in a wholly different manner in a bug-eyed alien.[7] The precise manner in which different sense impressions are realized in creatures like us is of course a matter of empirical investigation and discovery. Though it might seem a bit weird, there is nothing in the bare notion of a sense impression that would prohibit non-material realizations of sense impressions. Perhaps that is what non-zombies profess to have. The notion of a sense impression is thus neutral between materialism and dualism.

My suggestion, then, is that when a zombie like me talks about "what it's like" to have certain conscious experiences, these claims are to be unpacked in terms of different subjects' sense impressions. In particular, the expression "what it's like" picks out the particular manner in which a subject realizes its sense impressions. Such a proposal makes eminently good sense of inter- and intra-personal comparisons of the qualitative dimension of experience. Due to our purported physiological differences, what it's like for me to see red is different from what it's like for a bat to see red, if indeed a bat can see red at all. Of course, there might not be anything it's like for bats to see red, because they might lack the requisite discriminative capacities. Conversely, there is *nothing* for me to echolocate an insect; I am just not equipped for that line of work. And though we have broadly similar perceptual equipment, what it's like for me to see red might be somewhat different from non-standard folk—synaesthetes, for instance, or the folk outfitted with those color-inverting lenses of philosophical legend, insofar as we have cottoned onto different physiological states to be our indicators of red. Furthermore, since the physical constitution of my very own perceptual apparatus might change over time, even though I might not realize it, what it's like for me to see red now might well *not* be what it's like for me to see red in the future or the past; it might undergo, if you will, a "red shift." Indeed, this thought enables us to make sense of the highly fanciful notion of "spectrum inversion" by conceiving of cases in which what it's like for one to see red eventually shifting all the way across the spectrum to become what it's like for one to see green.

One especially appealing aspect of my way of speaking is that it allows zombies like me to hold on to broadly internalist intuitions about "what it's like," while at the same to remain steadfast externalists about intentional or representational content. On my parlance, internally indistinguishable subjects (those "molecule-by-molecule" duplicates of philosophical fantasy) will have experiences with similar phenomenal characters, even though external considerations dictate that the representational contents of their experiences are radically different.

So what about those *intra*-personal comparisons of what it's like to have certain experiences that fuel those all-important explanatory gap intuitions, which allow those so-called "modal arguments" for the supermateriality of consciousness to get off the ground? What is one to say about the lingering sense that what it's like for me to see red

or to be in pain could well have been very different from what it is actually like? I am inclined to think that these intuitions are a natural product of the functional unspecificity built into our talk about sense impressions. Recall that the notion of a sense impression is that of a role that could be played by different physiological states. So on my zombic analysis of "what it's like," it turns out that there are two distinct ways to cash out the possibility that what it's like to have a certain experience could very well have been otherwise, corresponding to two distinct ways in which one can pick out the referent of "what it's like" in modal contexts. On the one hand, the referent of "what it's like" can be fixed with respect to the indicated sense content, allowing the internal discriminatory state to vary across possible situations. Read in this fashion, the thought that what it's like to have a certain sort of experience could have been otherwise means that it is conceivable for me to have recruited some other internal discriminatory state to indicate that sense content. Alternately, the referent of "what it's like" can be taken to be fixed with respect to the underlying, internal discriminatory state, allowing the indicated sense content to vary. On this interpretation, the thought that "what it's like" could have been otherwise asserts that I could have recruited that internal discriminatory state to indicate some altogether different sense content. If we run these two distinct conclusions together, as I suspect folk like Chalmers do, then these separate thoughts generate the idea that "what it's like" can be determined neither by a subject's physiology nor by the contents of its intentional states.[8] But now we can see that from an appropriately zombic perspective the intuitions so suggestive of an explanatory gap actually trade on different ways in which one can pick out the referent of "what it's like." The hard problem of consciousness is partly a product of a readily explicable referential ambiguity.[9]

Land of the Dead: Zombies Everywhere

My relatively modest aim here has been to sketch out a perfectly materialistic notion of sense impression that can make sense of many of the curious things philosophers have said about the qualitative character of conscious experience, including their insistence upon an explanatory gap between the phenomenal and the material. In so doing, I think I can show how zombies can learn to pass as "normal." Zombies like me have had to learn how to talk like everyone else, but must do so without the benefit of "consciousness," as qualia-lovers understand it. However, this account just scratches the surface. Time and Space constraints prevent me from addressing the role of attributions of *knowledge of what it's like* to have certain experiences. (Well, that and the fact that I laid out my account of such attributions at an earlier New Mexico-West Texas Philosophical Society meeting.[10])

In any event, this account should raise the question as to whether there might be any *non*-zombies around (left?). If you think that immaterial qualia attend your conscious experience, then so be it. I have not taken it upon myself to show that the very notion of qualia is unimaginably preposterous or otherwise self-refuting, nor do I deny the logical conceivability of non-zombies.[11] If on some other grounds, however—the causal closure of the physical, perhaps, or the peculiarly private nature of qualia—you find the notion of

qualia unattractive, then I have provided you with a recipe for avoiding it. You, too can embrace your own inner zombie, and do so in perfectly good conscience.

NOTES

1. See, for instance, Robert Kirk's *Zombies and Consciousness* (Oxford UP, 2005).

2. To be sure, this option has occasionally been entertained, only to be discarded almost as soon as proffered. Witness Dennett's playful comment on p. 406 of *Consciousness Explained* (Little, Brown, 1991) that perhaps the most satisfying response to the zombie argument is to conclude that zombies are "not just possible. They're actual. We're all zombies." However, Dennett declines to treat this option seriously and warns us in a footnote that "it would be an act of desperate intellectual dishonesty to quote this assertion out of context!" Instead, his reasoned response to the zombie menace is thoroughly conventional (and in direct opposition to the one explored here); zombies must be stamped out as "unimaginably preposterous." See also "The Unimagined Preposterousness of Zombies: Commentary of Moody, Flanagan, and Polger," Chapter 10 of Dennett's *Brainchildren: Essays on Designing Minds* (MIT, 1998).

3. This would seem to mark a significant distinction between genuine concept-mongering beings such as myself and mere discriminatory systems such as thermometers and parrots.

4. This notion of sense impression closely resembles that of Wilfrid Sellars (one of the great zombies of our time?). See *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* (Part XVI). Sellars initially introduced the notion of a sense impression to distinguish sensations from thoughts. The sense impression is the non-conceptual "descriptive residue" that distinguishes a perceiving that something is the case from a mere thinking that it is the case.

5. By the way, this account of sense impressions extends nicely to the self attribution of other psychological states said to have phenomenal content. I am thinking here of inner sensory states like pain, brute cravings or urges, moods, and of course, emotional states like anger, fear or exhilaration. When acquiring the concepts of such states, we learn that they have behavioral and expressive cores; their ordinary application is to subjects reacting or expressing themselves in certain ways to specific types of situations. As Darwin famously advanced, there appear to be characteristic responses and facial expressions associated with, and indicative of, each of the basic emotions. Put much too crudely, fearful creatures typically react to situations they find threatening by cowering or fleeing, while angry creatures typically bare their teeth and show aggression. By the same token, there are characteristic reactions to bodily harm that we associate with creatures in pain. We then discover that just as in the case of sensing external qualities, we can in our own case associate such inner sensory, emotional, and psychological states with particular sense impressions. They each have their distinctive "feels" for us, such as the characteristic flush of anger or the trembling and quickening of the heart and respiratory rates associated with fear. Using these sense impressions, we can effortlessly and reliably report the applicability of such concepts to our own person without having to observe our own outward behavior, and can even begin to apply them in our own case to those non-standard situations in which such feelings fail to produce the standard responses (i.e., fear that does not result in flight). And we can begin to understand similar self-reports in others. Consequently, we can readily account for the *privileged access* we appear to have with respect to many of our own psychological and emotional states that we do not have when we consider those states in others, and in our own case, we begin to apply these concepts in experience, and so make non-inferential "observations" of our own states of mind. It bears mentioning that I do not believe that this account of privileged access extends to certain *doxastic* mental states which do not possess their own characteristic "feel" or phenomenology.

6. Nevertheless, sense impressions stand (or are supposed to stand) in containment and exclusion relationships to one another in much the same way that the features that they are impressions of stand in relation to one another. This thought is all I need to capture the truth behind the idea that sense impressions are (or at least should be) *images* of the external world. Just as an instance of some determinate shade of red, such as scarlet or crimson, is at the same time an instance of the determinable red, the particular internal state that realizes (or plays the role of) a sense impression of scarlet at the same time realizes a sense impression of red. That is, the class of red sense impressions includes that of scarlet sense impressions. Similarly, red and green sense impressions are supposed to exclude one another just like properties of redness and greenness presumably

exclude one another in the external world. By the way, it will be obvious here (and throughout) that I appeal to a naïve realism about colors (and other perceptual properties), according to which such properties are primarily attributed to (or possessed by) everyday objects in the external world, and not sensations. I am afraid that this paper is not the place to defend such a quotidian position.

7. Sense impressions do not have to be similar even between members of the same species. To take a striking example, persons with synaesthesia appear to have recruited sense impressions governing their application of various observational concepts which are less discriminating than normal folk, and which are subject to an unusual range of non-standard conditions. Conditions in which they are inclined to say something "looks red" to them (such as the presence of particular numbers or letters) can be quite different, and more extensive, than the conditions in which I am apt to say something looks red to me.

8. By way of contrast, observe that the notion of a belief-that-p, although also a functional notion (at least on most prevailing accounts of propositional attitudes), is much more tightly tied to its intentional content. Thus it does not naturally lend itself to the second, physiological unpacking. This strikes me as a significant difference between our talk about intentionality (which tends to mask our possible physiological differences) and our talk of phenomenality (which tends to bring similarities and differences in our physiological constitutions more to the fore).

9. This type of referential ambiguity (which outside the philosophy of language, appears to generate little trouble, and even less excitement) is characteristic of definite descriptions in modal contexts. For instance, the statement, "My wife could have been in pictures." similarly admits of two distinct readings. It could either be about Monica (my actual, current wife) in particular, or it might be understood as making a claim about the range of my erstwhile marital prospects. In some of his more technical arguments against the Type B materialist's strategy of positing *a posteriori* identities between the material and the phenomenal, David Chalmers claims that purely phenomenal concepts must refer to the same phenomenal items across all possible worlds; there is not any distinction between their primary and secondary intensions. As you can see, I disagree; I would claim that so-called "phenomenal concepts" (those formed by the "what it's like" operator) act more like definite descriptions than names.

10. "So Just What Is It about Mary? On Knowing 'What It's Like,'" *Southwest Philosophical Studies*, 27 (2005): 20-26.

11. Recall that the bare notion of a sense impression does not logically preclude their immaterial realization.